

# Lost in a Forest of Symbols: Can Some Animal, Bird, Tree or Djinn Help us Understand Myth and Folklore?

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to investigate the structure of a folktale and to give to each of the three structural sites that almost always constitute its narrative their distinctive emotional, moral and social qualities. Further, its three structural spaces are chronologically arranged. I should like to term the *first* spatial and temporal order, which exists “somewhere in the country beyond the river...” and “once upon a time,” as the *site of sorrow* or the *structure of curse*. Here time is frozen and human beings are paralyzed. The *second* structural element, which is at the heart of *every* folktale, can be called the *artifice of enchantment*. Its boundaries are fluid, forest-covered or unmapped. And time is either a succession of instances or an eternity depending on who is recording or who is suffering. I should like to call the *third* structural element of the folktale as the *site of renewal of energies* or the *structure of communitas*. It emerges from the realm of enchantment and restores human community. People begin to participate in historical and secular time again but live *as if* their moments of recovered joy are at one with eternity.

“Ah, if one could live like that, not at odds with things.”

George Seferis. <sup>1</sup>

His father looked at him in amazement.  
 "How would you know what the sparrows are saying?  
 You're not a soothsayer, are you?  
 "No, but my teacher taught me the languages of various animals."  
 "Don't tell me where the money went!" said the father.  
 "What was the teacher thinking of? I meant him to teach you the  
 languages of men, not of dumb beasts."

Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales*.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of folklore is the *artifice of enchantment* we create for ourselves to evade, however temporarily, the hard neutrality of the real world and to overcome our sorrow over the inevitable failure of dreams, aspirations and desires. The artifice of enchantment lies, like Arnold Van Gennep's liminal spaces, between and beside two radically distinct sites of action or structures of organizations.<sup>3</sup> Because it is liminal its boundaries are fluid, forest-covered or unmapped. And time is either a succession of instances or an eternity depending on who is recording or who is suffering. The first spatial and temporal order which is utterly different from and *prior* to the artifice of enchantment—e.g. "once upon a time...somewhere in the country beyond the river..."—is the *site of sorrow* or the *structure of curse*. The invocation of the *site of sorrow* or the *structure of curse* is important because it is the cause for stepping across the boundary of the real into the enchanted. At the site of sorrow where a curse hangs over all things, time is frozen and its space is guarded by high walls, bramble, or evil spirits. At this site society is so petrified, so fearful and rigid, that it is on the brink of annihilation or non-being.

The second spatial and temporal order, which *emerges from* the realm of enchantment and lies on the other side, is the *site of renewal of energies* or the *structure of communitas*. Here, human time, which had been enchained like any of the countless princes and princesses imprisoned in dungeons in the site of sorrow, begins to flow again. People begin to participate in historical and secular time again but live *as if* their moments of recovered joy are at one with eternity—e.g. "the garden blossomed once again," "and they lived happily ever after." Society acquires new moral, political and spiritual boundaries. If, the structure of curse was held together by force, magic or law of the tyrant the structure of the new holds the promise of sympathy, reason and gracefulness.<sup>4</sup>

The narrative ordering of the three structures is, of course, chronological because the realm of enchantment and the site of renewal are a consequence of curse in the beginning. Each of the three sites belongs to three deferent levels of perception, and if looked at through the visionary eye they are the same structures and the same sites. The

only difference is that at the site of curse the ordinary world is obliterated by a brooding and self-absorbed subject from its perceptual ability. It is a sterile world where ordinary desires remain frustratingly unfulfilled. Love, especially erotic love, is threatened by instruments of law and the guardians of custom both of which are either obsolete or arbitrary. A jealous king, a cruel stepmother, an unappeasable giant impose all sorts of punishing conditions on the young to prevent sexual union without which the world would cease to be. Indeed, to ensure that youthful energies do not pose any danger to the orthodox and sterile ways of living and being, the demonic masters of the soul are willing to sacrifice others—and as we all know there is never an end to the sacrifice of others. How many times in folktales young girls are sent to the giant's den so that a helpless society can continue to live a life of utter abject impotence? In folktale both insatiable lust on the one hand and asceticism on the other are not conducive to a normal and healthy social and natural order; they only add to the world's melancholia and are grievous errors against the spirit of life.

As in any liminal space, in the realm of enchantment the previous structure with all its guilt, anxiety and paralysis of imagination and will, is spontaneously and intuitively cast aside. That is why a folktale is not an example of some lost and buried primal religiosity as Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm believed, but a sharp turning away from it. And, of course, it is not a source of racial pride as it is sometimes presented by both by the arrogant and the defeated. It does not belong to some privileged linguistic or to some superior tribe; it is the common subtext of all imaginative human communities everywhere. In the artifice of enchantment the past is seen as a *mallefic* or malevolent time where normal modes of thinking and acting fail to reveal both the significance of things as well as the causes that lie behind certain events. It is difficult to break into the realm of enchantment because the 'wise guardians of sorrow' continue to try to mask over the difficulties within the social order, explain away existential questions, and respond with disapproval and violence when challenged (cf. Victor Turner, pp. 188, 206, 242). But what the liminality of enchantment demands is that the old valuation of things, the whole system of relationships, norms of thought and all those acts which led the society to the collective misadventure so as to compel everything that abides on earth to live under a curse, be repudiated. Only after such repudiation a new world of infinite possibilities of thought, meaning and reorganization is revealed—and revealed in a visionary flash as sharp as lightening as clear as a single magical word. From a social order that was "deficit in meaning" as Levi-Strauss would have it, the folkloric hero moves into a forest of symbols overflowing with meanings.<sup>5</sup> The task of the hero is to read them and act so that some "miracle of transformation"

can take place and a radically different ethical, social or political order can emerge – a site where renewal of energies is possible and the spirit of life is free again, a structure of *communitas* within which the relation between men, animal, things, jinns and gods is mutually responsible and affirming. Octavio Paz is right when, thinking about Levi-Strauss, he says that folklore enables one to move away from despondency over the “nonsignificance of nature and the insignificance of men,” by transforming “the shapeless torrent of life” into a “family of symbols,” thereby urging one to “respect other societies and change one’s own.”<sup>6</sup> Then the dark night of winter and mourning can be transformed into a bright summer morning of marriage and celebration.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a folktale almost always begins with the *bhava* of *shok*—mourning in a house of death, sorrow spreading over a city of plague, regret at the loss of lovers, despair at ever finding a new source of fertile sustenance, etc. This note of *shok* is heard at the site of sorrow or within the structure of curse for there the perpetual and primal emergence of generations has stopped and the human spirit is threatened with extinction. The opening of every folktale bears witness to the fact that the reality of hunger, moral decrepitude, and emotional and physical paralysis afflicts everyone equally. When the huts are broken, the farms are fallow, the clothes are in tatters, the king is sunk in despair, the young virgin lies in a stupor, the shaman is evil or the lakes are dry, then the entire community suffers. Despondency is scripted into each and every life. A king’s son is in despair as he ponders existence itself, a scullery maid weeps over her lost love, a merchant can’t protect his daughter from predators, a giant threatens to eat up every thing that moves or a witch’s curse transforms trees, animals, birds and human beings into crystallized stones. Italo Calvino is, perhaps, right when he asserts that folktales are “fragments of an epic” of destitution – though, strangely enough, he narrows the realm of sorrow to the physical and economic deprivation of labourers, fishermen, or weavers, but does not consider the despondency of the soul that afflicts the sensitive who cannot understand why fate inflicts suffering and how to neutralize the pain at least for a few moments of their lives (“Introduction,” p. xxxii).

It is at this moment of extreme crisis, when something must happen to save the entire cosmology imagined by folklore from annihilation, that something *stirs* and someone *calls for action* in the universe of beings. A rock-hewn cave reveals its secrets or an old woman discloses a time of coherence when, as a tribal story-teller told Levi-Strauss, things used to occupy the place assigned to them according to the self-understanding of the social whole, and they were sacred because they had a place, thereby bestowing upon the cosmology of the folkloric its integrity.<sup>7</sup> The hero

is persuaded to imagine a time when men and women, gods and jinns, animals and birds, rivers and trees existed as part of a natural contract with each other, equal to each other, and so established a “system of relationships” (Octavio Paz, p. 8) with each other—a system of mutuality and reciprocity. The *Mahabharata* transforms and elaborates upon this instinctual order into the ethical and social ideal of *daana*, which is not merely the ritualized morality of ‘alms giving’ or ‘charity’, but the radical duty of “sharing what has been given, in the awareness that ones life is connected with other beings.”<sup>8</sup> But at the site of sorrow in a folktale those who can recall that once upon a time relations were not of power and powerlessness, of egotistical self-assertion and humiliation, or of human contempt for every other form of being and retaliatory provocation by those whose rights had been usurped, are now too old and decrepit to do anything to restore the world to its energetic abundance again. It is because, as Levi-Strauss says, physical and social integrity cannot withstand dissolution, (*Structural Anthropology*, p. 168) that some instinctually driven young soul, innocent at heart, foolhardy and adventurous for life itself—life unbounded by old ideas, theocracies, moralities, or social hierarchies—decides to *set out* to discover life giving resources. And as the questor sets forth, after refusing to continue within the decaying structures of curse and sorrow, the entire realm of the socially and humanly Other arouses itself to help the one upon whose victory the survival of the entire ‘earth household’ so crucially depends. As soon as the quest for change begins, and the young in their enthusiasm of spirit cross the boundary of the dying community, they step into the realm of enchantment. Only those who are decrepit and discarded by the social system, along with those who are derided because they belong to the non-human kingdom, are still confident in their knowledge that the enchanted is around the next bend in the road and has always been there. Thus, when a young man sets out to find the house where the king of the Sun lives, an old man directs him: “Just a stone’s throw from here...At the end of this street, on the right, you will see his palace. You can’t miss it...” (“The Billiards Player,” in Calvino, p. 65). And horses, snakes, geese or jinns living in banyan trees can decipher the forest of symbols that makes up the site of enchantment and guide the young past danger. When a young adventurer discovers that he must release the maiden imprisoned at the bottom of a dry well if the waters for fertility have to be released and a sexual union outside the taboos of paralyzing structures can revive the human genetic pool again, a bird understands his longing, takes him under its wings and insures that marriage, agriculture and social imagination will thrive again.<sup>9</sup> A young seeker of the spiritual worth of the universe is taught by a cuckoo the gospel of the good can easily be apprehended in the ordinary: “the trivial joys of this, our life on earth, are like a conjuration, like a dream,

like a rainbow in the sky, the echo of a voice shouting into a deserted valley."<sup>10</sup>

Since, in folktale, all that abides below the sheltering sky or under the earth, and all that has a place above the clouds, is fated to suffer the same sorrow (that includes the sky gods and the chthonic demons) which no conscious action in time can redeem for long, folklore has no characters with common and recognizable names. Unlike myths, in folktales there is no one who can be remembered for the skill and cunning of Odysseus, persevering love of Penelope, relentlessness of Medea, unquestioning obedience of Hanuman or wisdom in all adverse circumstances of Krishna. Myths have characters who fulfill the finest requirement of what is called thinking, e.g. they are continuously in debate with themselves and each other, uncertain of the questions they must ask, and unsure of the answers they receive (this point forms the basic assumption of Hannah Arendt's thesis on democracies). No one in a folktale is ever confronted with unanswerable riddles: What is man; what do women desire, who is Death, what is Dharma? Questions in folklore always have solutions. We always know that the word 'sesame' will open caverns of wonder and that the name 'rumpelstiltskin' will eventually be guessed and that a secret mantra given to someone will eventually be disclosed. One should add that a folktale also does not have any recognizable bardic face or distinctive voice. Individuals in a folktale, therefore, are hardly ever remarkable for their eccentricities, for their doubts or their troubled relationship with the world that surrounds them. They are recognizable by their external and generic shape and form – except for the witch who can metamorphose into any shape and hence has nothing peculiar to distinguish her. Instead, as Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson have taught us, the gestures, the styles of thought and the inflections of speech of each of the characters who have ever come into being over the vast stretches of recorded memories of the folk anywhere, are indexable – syllables heard for a moment in the grammar of time before they disappear into the indifferent silence only to reappear in another story, in another sorrow.<sup>11</sup>

It is only after the reality of the present social, political, and earthly world has been acknowledged as *shok* that folklore begins to construct its artifice of enchantment. Perhaps, a folktale does endorse Prospero's claim in *The Tempest* that "we are such stuff as dreams are made on." And further claims that, since we become what we behold and behold as we are (William Blake's formulation), it is crucial for our survival, and also of the earth and the Gods, that we think differently, see the world as perpetually renewed, and dream of "a new heaven on a new earth" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode"). In the realm of enchantment, because the imagination is free and uncensored, a visionary

alchemy happens: that which was dross gleams with intelligence, and that which once glittered with uncanny light crumbles like fool's gold. Folktales are after all an infinite succession of little dreams using whatever "rough magic" (*The Tempest*, act v, sc. 1, line 50) they know to save our lives from sliding, once again and always, into despair and 'dusty death'. In a folktale a questor must enter the realm of enchantment or let the entire social order die.

In the artifice of enchantment the questor is urged to build his dreams with utmost self-consciousness and confidence. The young men and women who cross over its threshold do not seek rational explanations for that which revealed. If they did they would fall back into the old paralyzing ways. Instead, they learn to think for themselves and trust the good will of others they meet. Thus, in a folktale, as soon as a young man enters a forest it becomes a place of enigmas. He reaches a point in the road—and there are always paths in these forests of symbols indicating that others too have traveled down them and their experiences have left their footprints on them—where it branches off in three different directions: "A stone marker stood at the beginning of each new road, The first stone read: WHOEVER TAKES THIS ROAD WILL RETURN. The second stone read: GOODNESS KNOWS WHAT YOUR FATE WILL BE IF YOU TAKE THIS ROAD. The third stone read the opposite of the first: WHOEVER TAKES THIS ROAD WILL NEVER RETURN. He was about to start down the first road, but changed his mind and set foot in the second, only to backtrack and enter the third" ("The Stolen Crown," Calvino, pp. 142-143). Soon after, of course, he meets an old woman, an old gardener and a goose who offer him magical help which, of course, he accepts unhesitatingly. He realizes, as does every other protagonist in folktale, that wisdom and an innate sense of order of animals, birds trees or jinns is, and indeed always was, decipherable by most human beings; that all the resources of the earth are, and always were, available to those who act ethically toward themselves and others. That is another way of saying that we are our own sources of salvation and we alone damn ourselves. Further reinforcing, thereby, the basic assumption that a questor must be self-making and self-knowing. The idea is that in the forest of symbols words, people, and things no longer have an objective referentiality assigned by others but, instead, have talismanic power and like talismans must be accepted on faith. Mahatma Gandhi may have had such questors in mind when he claimed that a good man in search of truth has "the undogmatic sense of being carried along by a demanding and yet trustworthy universe."<sup>12</sup> That is why these people, condemned as foolish or ignorant by a morally opaque social order now under a curse, suddenly appear to be so assured in their *intuitive* grasp and so sure-footed on the path they choose to take.

In the artifice of enchantment, the process of learning to accept new modes of acquiring knowledge often takes place on crossroads lost in the midst of abundant forests (or their other visual cognates: deserts and seas under open skies). The first thing the heroes of folktales must learn to have is, what the Dalai Lama calls, an “undiscriminating compassion towards all living beings, without making any distinction.”<sup>13</sup> Following the essential thrust of folktales, one may have modify the Dalai Lama’s statement, making it less human-centric and extend compassion to all things which have their abode on earth. The great 9<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist poet, Shatidev, whom the Dalai Lama quotes often with admiration, says all this with simple gracefulness:

When both myself and others  
Are similar in that we wish to be happy  
What is so special about me?

(Cf. Dalai Lama, p. 61)

As soon as sympathy is stirred, the questor begins to hear sounds and syllables that are both familiar and unfamiliar. His *rational mind* tells him that what he hears is beyond human comprehension; his *intuitive sense* tells him that he must listen more carefully and decipher them. Or, which is the same thing, he must learn to hear his own language differently and hear within it translations of other languages and modes of speaking. For as the philosopher Montaigne says in one of his essays, nowhere is it said that “the essence of thinking has reference to man alone.” All the living and non-living things which abide on earth think their way through it. If a questor has to gain access to wisdom, he will have to erase the distance between his mother tongue and the languages of others to understand how each and everything thinks of its place in the order of the earth. This in itself is a humbling experience. As the novelist David Malouf says in his wonderfully imaginative biography of Ovid: “Seeing the world through this other tongue I see it differently. A different world.”<sup>14</sup> But what is of even more momentous consequence is that the questor discovers, as if by his own volition and effort, that he can hear birds, animals, trees, and djinns talking amongst themselves and to each other (some linguists now believe that bird-songs preceded human speech and may have been pattered on them). He is exhilarated to find another, richer world of languages, knowledges and ideas from which the curse of self-regard had excluded the entire social order to which, once upon a time, he had also belonged. One of the strangest aspects of any folktale is the ease with which the questor begins to participate in the endlessly varied world opened by, what must properly be identified as parrot-tongue, wolf-tongue, demon-tongue, baniyan-tongue etc (I almost added serpent-tongue only to realize that human beings have never really forgotten it and speak it fluently). Here the dirge-full sounds



of sorrow, which he was familiar with and was part of the social curse, is forgotten and replaced by the splendor of 'Other' sounds, the splendour of alphabets which are familiar and always new. It is as if, the questor has to put on as many masks as there are things in the universe if the Self has to dissolve the dichotomy between human and animal, human and god, human and death so as to know what it is and at the same time know that it is impossible to know. Folklore insists on the idea that this understanding is so difficult that the questor has to undergo a series of initiatory rites, answer questions, undertake impossible tasks—in folklore the tasks assigned are generally three, a number which encodes within it the notion of progression and endlessness—before his worthiness to be what he dreams of becoming can be affirmed. It is not surprising that folklore surrounding Christian monasticism is full of wise, gentle and ever helpful beasts.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Yudhishtthra in the *Mahabharata* has to learn, not only to recognize Dharma in the sternly questioning Crane upon whose satisfaction alone can his brothers be resurrected and in the mongrel dog at the threshold of paradise, but also learn from the animals the gospel of *anarsmasya*, of non-cruelty, without which the earth almost ceases to be in the epic. Once the questor reaches this understanding the next crucial move out of the realm of enchantment can be made. The passage out of enchantment is as dangerous as the journey into it was. Yet the boundary separating it from the world of time and history must be crossed. Enchantment alone is utterly useless for the renewal of life's energies and for social reawakening. The hero of a folktale nearly always forgets the magical formula that had seen him through danger.

Folklore is, of course, absolutely clear that this second threshold of enchantment back to social reality cannot be successfully crossed over without wisdom. Those who try to do so are condemned to an eternal state of death-in-life. Thus, the ignorant Knight in John Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Mercie" who only dreams of the sensuality of the world, finds himself thrown back "On a cold hill's side...alone and palely loitering" through a land where "the sedge is withered from the Lake/ And no bird sing." And the poet, in William Blake's "The Golden Net," who dares to enter the artifice of enchantment without adequate intellectual resources, finds himself bound in a golden net and weeps:

"Under the Net I stray,  
Now intreating Burning Fire,  
Now intreating iron wire,  
Now intreating Tears & Sighs.  
O when will the morning rise?"<sup>16</sup>

Calvino is partially right when he says that folktale "moves swiftly to a healing solution" (p. xxix). The questor's entry into the *site of renewal* of

*energies* or the *structure of communitas*, signals a return of human society and human time, but with the imaginative cunning to make the earth a sanctuary and history meaningful as it may have been ‘once upon a time’ (*in illo tempore*). One can say, with Mircea Eliade, that now time and society are reincarnated (*Cosmos and History*, pp. 3-20). Society is restored to its state of plenitude at the original moment of time—e.g. prior to the curse, before the fall into sorrow. But there is one radical difference between the structures at the beginning and the end. The restored society does not emerge from nature but is the product of human effort—effort of labour, reason and imagination together. This is signaled by what seems strange at first. In a folktale, once the move into the site of renewal has been successfully made, all the animals, birds, trees and jinns who had been profoundly concerned and had helped simply disappear—or return to the spaces and modes of being to which they originally belonged. Marriages happen again, kings are crowned, children are born, gardens are laid, lions go back to the forest, jinns are bottled up, moral lessons are learnt, and the cycle of generation starts once again on a note of joy. At the end of almost every folktale we are told that the helping spirit “gave his...blessing and vanished” (“Fair Brow,” in Calvino, p. 141). It is as if in a ritual performance men and women take off their animal, bird or demon masks and resume their human form again. Such disappearance, however, is also necessary. The questors are empowered to bring about the restitution of the human because they have so absorbed the experience of enchantment that they can forget it as something extraordinary. They know now, what they had known once upon a time, that enchantment is around them everywhere; the real is also enchanted—or at least ought to be. To use a visionary poet inspired by the inhabitants of folkloric realms, they must stop their conversation with gods, turn away from mesmeric forces, and be “the singing masters” (W. B. Yeats) of their own destiny.

But, lest we believe that at the end of folktale we have reached the state of permanent bliss, we are forced to remember that the figure of Death is present both at the beginning and the end of every folktale. Staring at the face of Death, at the site of sorrow, the human spirit arouses itself to find ways of living, and having found them has to learn to face Death again (cf. Paz, *Levi-Strauss*, p. 52). The trials of the folkloric questor will have to be undergone again and another folktale of enchantment will have to be told to find a way back to the site of renewed energies.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Complete Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrad (London: Anvil Press, 1995), p.75.
- <sup>2</sup> Translated by George Martin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.68.
- <sup>3</sup> *Rites of Passage*, translated by Monika B. Vizedom (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960).
- <sup>4</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 206.
- <sup>5</sup> *Structural Anthropology*, translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grunfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p.181.
- <sup>6</sup> Octavio Paz, *Levi-Strauss: An Introduction*, translated by J. S. Bernstein and Maxine Bernstein New York: Delta Books, 1967), pp. 50-51; 97.
- <sup>7</sup> "Science of the Concrete," in *The Discontinuous Universe: Selected Writings in Contemporary Consciousness*, edited by Sallie sears and Georgiana W. Lord (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p. 362).
- <sup>8</sup> Chaturvedi Badrinath, *The Mahabharata: An Inquiry into the Human Condition* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), p. 35.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Bollingen, 1959), p. 26.
- <sup>10</sup> See the Tibetan text, *The Dharma among the Birds*, quoted by Alexander Norman in *Holder of the White Lotus: The Lives of the Dalai Lama* (London: Little, Brown, 2008), p. 18.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Antti Aarne, *The Types of Folktale* (Helsinki: Soumalainen Tiedeakatemia. 1961) and Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955).
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted by Eric Erickson, *Gandhi's Truth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p.111.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Heart of Compassion: A Dalai Lama Reader* (Delhi: Full Circle and the Foundation for Universal Responsibility, 1997), p.35.
- <sup>14</sup> *An Imaginary Life* (1978; rpt. London: Vintage, 1999), p.65.
- <sup>15</sup> For an easily available series of stories about the desert fathers and their dependence on the animal kingdom for survival, see William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), pp.295-96.
- <sup>16</sup> Blake; *Collected Poems*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966). p.424

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